

British Werewolves

By

Elliott O'Donnell

In my investigations of haunted houses and my psychical research work generally, I have met people who have informed me they have seen phantasms, in shape half human and half beast, that might well be the earth-bound spirits of werewolves.

A Miss St. Denis told me she was once staying on a farm, in Merlonethshire, where she witnessed a phenomenon of this class. The farm, though some distance from the village, was not far off the railway station, a very diminutive affair, with only one platform and a mere box that served as a waiting-room and booking-office combined. It was, moreover, one of those stations where the separate duties of station-master, porter, booking-clerk, and ticket-collector are performed by one and the same person, and where the signal always appears to be down. As the platform commanded the only paintable view in the neighbourhood, Miss St. Denis often used to resort there with her sketch-book. On one occasion she had stayed rather later than usual, and on rising hurriedly from her campstool saw, to her surprise, a figure which she took to be that of a man, sitting on a truck a few yards distant, peering at her. I say to her surprise, because, excepting on the rare occasion of a train arriving, she had never seen anyone at the station beside the station-master, and in the evening the platform was invariably deserted. The loneliness of the place was for the first time brought forcibly home to her. The station-master's tiny house was at least some hundred yards away, and beyond that there was not another habitation nearer than the farm. On all sides of her, too, were black, frowning precipices, full of seams and fissures and inequalities, showing vague and shadowy in the fading rays of the sun. Here and there were the huge, gaping mouths of gloomy slate quarries that had long been disused, and were now half full of foul water. Around them the earth was heaped with loose fragments of rock which had evidently been detached from the principal mass and shivered to pieces in the fall. A few trees, among which were the black walnut, the slippery elm, and here and there an oak, grew among the rocks, and attested by this dwarfish stature the ungrateful soil in which they had taken root. It was not an exhilarating scene, but it was one that had a peculiar fascination for Miss St. Denis— a fascination she could not explain, and which she now began to regret. The darkness had come on very rapidly, and was especially concentrated, so it seemed to her, round the spot where she sat, and she could make nothing out of the silent figure on the truck, save that it had unpleasantly bright eyes and there was something queer about it. She coughed to see if that would have any effect, and as it had none she coughed again. Then she spoke and said, "Can you tell me the time, please?" But there was no reply, and the figure still sat there staring at her. Then she grew uneasy and, packing up her things, walked out of the station, trying her best to look as if nothing had occurred. She glanced over her shoulder; the figure was following her. Quickening her pace, she assumed a jaunty air and whistled, and turning round again, saw the strange figure still coming after her. The road would soon be at its worst stage of loneliness, and, owing to the cliffs on either side of it, almost pitch dark. Indeed, the spot positively invited murder, and she might shriek herself hoarse without the remotest chance of making herself heard. To go on with this outre figure so unmistakably and persistently stalking her, was out of the question. Screwing up courage, she swung round, and raising herself to her full height, cried "What do you want? How dare you?"—She got no further, for a sudden spurt of dying sunlight, playing over the figure, showed her it was nothing human, nothing she had ever conceived possible. It was a nude grey thing, not unlike a man in body, but with a wolf's head. As it sprang forward, its light eyes ablaze with ferocity, she instinctively felt in her pocket, whipped out a pocket flash-light, and pressed the button. The effect was magical; the creature shrank back, and putting two paw-like hands in front of its face to protect its eyes, faded into nothingness.

She subsequently made inquiries, but could learn nothing beyond the fact that in one of the quarries close to the place where the phantasm had vanished, some curious bones, partly human and partly animal, had been unearthed, and that the locality was always shunned after dusk. Miss St Denis thought as I did, that what she had seen might very well have been the earth-bound spirit of a werewolf.

The case of another haunting of this nature was related to me last year. A young married couple of the name of Anderson, having acquired, through the death of a relative, a snug fortune, resolved to retire from business and spend the rest of their lives in indolence and ease. Being fond of the country, they bought some land in Cumberland, at the foot of some hills, far away from any town, and built on it a large two-storied villa.

They soon, however, began to experience trouble with their servants, who left them on the pretext that the place was lonely, and that they could not put up with the noises that they heard at night. The Andersons ridiculed their servants, but when their children remarked on the same thing they viewed the matter more seriously. "What are the noises like?" they inquired. "Wild animals," Willie, the eldest child, replied. "They come howling round the window at night and we hear their feet patter along the passage and stop at our door." Much mystified, Mr. and Mrs.

Anderson decided to sit up with the children and listen. They did so, and between two and three in the morning were much startled by a noise that sounded like the growling of a wolf—Mr.

Anderson had heard wolves in Canada—immediately beneath the window. Throwing open the window, he peered out, the moon was fully up and every stick and stone was plainly discernible; but there was now no sound and no sign of any animal. When he had closed the window the growling at once recommenced, yet when he looked again nothing was to be seen. After a while the growling ceased, and they heard the front door, which they had locked before coming upstairs, open, and the footsteps of some big, soft-footed animal ascend the stairs. Mr. Anderson waited till the steps were just outside the room and then flung open the door, but the light from his acetylene lamp revealed a passage full of moonbeams—nothing else.

He and his wife were now thoroughly mystified. In the morning they explored the grounds, but could find no trace of footmarks, nothing to indicate the nature of their visitant. It was now close on Christmas, and as the noises had not been heard for some time, it was hoped that the disturbances would not occur again. The Andersons, like all modern parents, made idols of their children. They never did wrong, nothing was too good for them, and everything they wanted they had. At Christmas, perhaps, their authority was more particularly in evidence; at any rate, it was then that the greatest care was taken that the menu should be in strict accordance with their instructions. "What shall Santa Claus bring you this time, my darlings;" Mr. Anderson asked, a week or so before the great day arrived; and Willie, aged six, at once cried out: "What a fool you are daddy! It is all tosh about old Claus, there's no such person!"

"Wait and see!" Mr. Anderson meekly replied. "You mark my words, he will come into your room on Christmas Eve laden with presents."

"I don't believe it!" Willie retorted. "You told us that silly tale last year and I never saw any Claus!"

"He came when you were asleep, dearie," Mrs Anderson ventured to remark.

"Well! I'll keep awake this time!" Willie shouted.

"And we'll take the presents first and pinch old Claus afterwards," Violet Evelyn, the second child, joined in.

"And I'll prick his trowsers wif pins!" Horace, aged three and a half, echoed "I don't care nothink for old Santa Claus!" and he pulled a long nose in the manner his doting father had taught him.

Christmas Eve came at last—a typical old-fashioned Christmas with heaps of snow on the ground and frost on the window-panes and trees. The Andersons' house was warm and comfortable—for once in a way the windows were shut—and enormous fires blazed merrily away in the grates. Whilst the children spent most of the day viewing the good things in the larder and speculating how much they could eat of each, and which would taste the nicest, Mr Anderson rehearsed in full costume the role of Santa Claus. He had an enormous sack full of presents—everything the children had demanded—and he meant to enter their room with it on his shoulder at about twelve o'clock.

Tea-time came, and during the interval between that meal and supper all hands—even Horace's—were at work, decorating the hall and staircases with holly and mistletoe. After supper "Good King Wencelas," "Noel," and one or two other carols were

sung, and the children then decided to go to bed.

It was then ten o'clock, and exactly two hours later their father, elaborately clad as Santa Claus, and staggering, in the orthodox fashion, beneath a load of presents, shuffled softly down the passage leading to their room. The snow had ceased falling, the moon was out, and the passage flooded with a soft, phosphorescent glow that threw into strong relief every minute object. Mr Anderson had got half-way along it when on his ears there suddenly fell a faint sound of yelping! His whole frame thrilled and his mind reverted to the scenes of his youth—to the prairies in the far-off West, where, over and over again, he had heard these sounds, and his faithful Winchester repeater had stood him in good service. Again the yelping—this time nearer.

Yes! it was undoubtedly a wolf; and yet there was an intonation in that yelping not altogether wolfish—something Mr. Anderson had never heard before, and which he was consequently at a loss to define. Again it rang out—much nearer this time, much more trying to the nerves, and the cold sweat of fear burst out all over him. Again—close under the wall of the house—a moaning, snarling, drawn-out cry that ended in a whine so piercing that Mr Anderson's knees shook. One of the children, Violet Evelyn he thought, stirred in her bed and muttered "Santa Claus! Santa Claus!" and Mr Anderson, with a desperate effort, staggered on under, his load and opened their door. The clock in the hall beneath began to strike twelve. Santa Claus, striving hard to appear jolly and genial, entered the room, and a huge grey, shadowy figure entered with him. A slipper thrown by Willie whizzed through the air, and, narrowly missing Santa Claus, fell to the ground with a clatter. There was then a deathly silence, and Violet and Horace, raising their heads, saw two strange figures standing in the centre of the room staring at one another—the one figure they at once identified by the costume. He was Santa Claus—but not the genial, rosy-cheeked Santa Claus their father had depicted. On the contrary, it was a Santa Claus with a very white face and frightened eyes—a Santa Claus that shook as if the snow and ice had given him the ague. But the other figure—what was it? Something very tall, far taller than their father, nude and grey, something like a man with the head of a wolf—a wolf with white pointed teeth and horrid, light eyes. Then they understood why it was that Santa Claus trembled; and Willie stood by the side of his bed, white and silent. It is impossible to say how long this state of things would have lasted, or what would eventually have happened, had not Mrs. Anderson, anxious to see how Santa Claus was faring, and rather wondering why he was gone so long, resolved herself to visit the children's room. As the light from her candle appeared on the threshold of the room the thing with the wolf's head vanished.

"Why, whatever were you all doing?" she began. Then Santa Claus and the children all spoke at once—whilst the sack of presents tumbled unheeded on the floor. Every available candle was soon lighted, and mother and father and Willie, Violet and Horace all spent the remainder of that night in close company. On the following day it was proposed, and carried unanimously, that the house should be put up for sale. This was done at the earliest opportunity, and fortunately for the Andersons suitable tenants were soon found. Before leaving, however, Mr. Anderson made another and more exhaustive search of the grounds, and discovered, in a cave in the hills immediately behind the house, a number of bones. Amongst them was the skull of a wolf, and lying close beside it a human skeleton, with only the skull missing. Mr Anderson burnt the bones, hoping that by so doing he would rid the house of its unwelcome visitor; and, as his tenants so far have not complained, he believes that the hauntings have actually ceased.

A lady whom I met at Tavistock some years ago told me that she had seen a phantasm, which she believed to be that of a werwolf, in the Valley of the Doones, Exmoor. She was walking home alone, late one evening, when she saw on the path directly in front of her the tall grey figure of a man with a wolf's head. Advancing stealthily forward, this creature was preparing to spring on a large rabbit that was crouching on the ground, apparently too terror-stricken to move, when the abrupt appearance of a stag bursting through the bushes in a wild state of stampede caused it to vanish. Prior to this occurrence, my informant had never seen a ghost, nor had she, indeed, believed in them; but now, she assures me, she is quite convinced as to their existence, and is of the opinion that the sub-human phenomenon she had witnessed was the spirit of one of those werwolves referred to by Gervase of Tilbury and Richard Verstegan—werwolves who were still earthbound owing to their incorrigible ferocity.

This opinion I can readily endorse, adding only that, considering the number of werwolves there must once have been in England, it is a matter of some surprise to me that phantasms are not more frequently seen.

Here is another account of this type of haunting narrated to me some summers ago by a Mr.

Warren, who at the time he saw the phenomenon was staying in the Hebrides, which part of the British Isles is probably richer than any other in spooks of all sorts.

"I was about fifteen years of age at the time," Mr Warren said, "and had for several years been residing with my grandfather who was an elder in the Kirk of Scotland. He was much interested in geology, and literally filled the house with fossils from the pits and caves round where we dwelt. One morning he came home in a great state of excitement, and made me go with him to look at some ancient remains he had found at the bottom of a dried-up tarn 'Look!' he cried, bending down and pointing at them, 'here is a human skeleton with a wolf's head. What do you make of it?' I told him I did not know but supposed it must be some kind of monstrosity. 'It's a werewolf!' he rejoined. 'that's what it is. A werewolf! This island was once overrun with sartyrs and werewolves! Help me carry it to the house.' I did as he bid me, and we placed it on the table in the back kitchen. That evening I was left alone in the house, my grandfather and the other members of the household having gone to the kirk. For some time I amused myself reading, and then, fancying I heard a noise in the back premises, I went into the kitchen. There was no one about, and becoming convinced that it could only have been a rat that had disturbed me, I sat on the table alongside the alleged remains of the werewolf, and waited to see if the noises would recommence. I was thus waiting in a listless sort of way, my back bent, my elbows on my knees, looking at the floor and thinking of nothing in particular, when there came a loud rat, tat, tat of knuckles on the window-pane. I immediately turned in the direction of the noise and encountered, to my alarm, a dark face looking in at me. At first dim and indistinct, it became more and more complete, until it developed into a very perfectly defined head of a wolf terminating in the neck of a human being. Though greatly shocked, my first act was to look in every direction for a possible reflection—but in vain. There was no light either without or within, other than that from the setting sun—nothing that could in any way have produced an illusion. I looked at the face and marked each feature intently. It was unmistakably a wolf's face, the jaws slightly distended, the lips wreathed in a savage snarl, the teeth sharp and white; the eyes light green, the ears pointed. The expression of the face was diabolically malignant, and as it gazed straight at me my horror was as intense as my wonder. This it seemed to notice, for a look of savage exultation crept into its eyes, and it raised one hand—a slender hand, like that of a woman, though with prodigiously long and curved finger-nails—menacingly, as if about to dash in the window-pane. Remembering what my grandfather had told me about evil spirits, I crossed myself, but as this had no effect, and I really feared the thing would get at me, I ran out of the kitchen and shut and locked the door, remaining in the hall till the family returned. My grandfather was much upset when I told him what had happened, and attributed my failure to make the spirit depart to my want of faith. Had he been there he assured me, he would soon have got rid of it; but he nevertheless made me help him remove the bones from the kitchen, and we reinterred them in the very spot where we had found them, and where, for aught I know to the contrary, they still lie."